

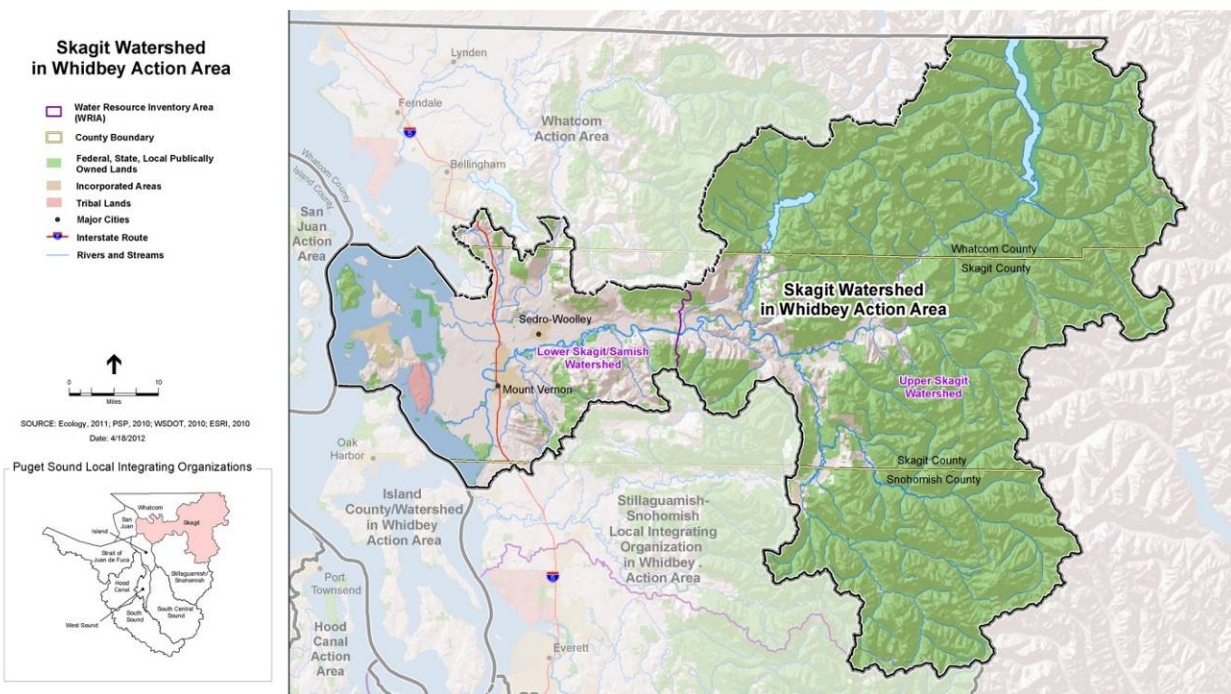
# Skagit Watershed

## Description of the Area

The Skagit River watershed is in the Whidbey Action Area. The largest watershed in Puget Sound, the Skagit River system begins in Canada and flows through the rugged Cascades down into low-lying valleys, draining into Skagit Bay. The rich soils of the river's broad delta support the region's most productive farmlands appreciated not only for their crops of berries, potatoes, and organic vegetables, but especially renowned for their bright fields of daffodils and tulips. The Upper Skagit River Valley is a favored wintering area for bald eagles. This impressive gathering of bald eagles, one of the four largest in the contiguous 48 states, coincides with the spawning runs of chum salmon on the Skagit River.

The Skagit River watershed is a fertile center of productivity for high-profile members of the ecosystem's food web including salmon, whales, herring, eagles, and people. Foremost among Puget Sound rivers in volume and length, the Skagit River system has 2,989 identified streams totaling approximately 4,540 linear miles. Fed by glaciers on Mount Baker and Glacier Peak, the Skagit has a different seasonal flow pattern from the other major river systems in the area. The Samish River, a smaller drainage consisting of mostly lower elevation terrain, enters Samish Bay and is part of the greater Skagit River watershed (Water Resource Inventory Areas [WRIAs] 3 and 4).

[The figure below is being updated.]



The upper river is home to the region's only major complex of dams. Seattle City Light's dams are located above natural salmon barriers. Puget Sound Energy's two Baker dams obstructed anadromous fish from historical habitat and inundated Baker Lake, a natural lake critical to Baker River sockeye. Today, fish passage facilities built and operated by Puget Sound Energy allow migration of sockeye and coho salmon and bull trout into the Shannon and Baker Reservoirs.

Also in the Skagit system, the Cascade, Sauk, and Suiattle Rivers are designated as Wild and Scenic, placing them among the largest undammed river systems remaining in the Pacific Northwest. The designation includes 158.5 miles within the Skagit River watershed. The Skagit Wild and Scenic River designation begins just east of the town of Sedro-Woolley, extending to Bacon Creek near the boundary of the Ross Lake National Recreation Area in the North Cascades National Park Service Complex.

The Skagit River delta contains large concentrations of wintering waterfowl, shorebirds, and raptors. A significant portion of an entire trumpeter swan population winters at the site, as well as the entire population of gray-bellied Brant, a subpopulation of Brant geese. Birdwatchers flock to the area in early spring to catch the inspiring sight of hundreds of snow geese rising off the fields in graceful waves. The estuarine and intertidal ecosystems are critical habitat for salmon, other marine fish, and wintering raptors and waterfowl.

Major cities and towns in the watershed include Mount Vernon, Anacortes, La Conner, Edison, Bow, Conway, Burlington, Sedro-Woolley, Lyman, Hamilton, Concrete, Rockport, Marblemount, and Newhalem. Once dependent on traditional northwest economic sectors such as agriculture, fishing, and wood products, the Skagit Valley has diversified—tourism, international trade, and specialized manufacturing now comprise the bulk of its economy. Skagit County also has ports and refineries, making it an important location for the petroleum industry.

Although the economy has continued to diversify, fishing for salmon, crab, and shellfish remain an important commercial and recreational activity. Fishing is also a very important cultural resource and provides a primary food source for the Swinomish, Sauk-Suiattle, Upper Skagit, and Samish Tribes. The Swinomish, Sauk-Suiattle, and Upper Skagit tribes all have reservation lands in the watershed.

Agriculture is still the major land use category in the river delta areas of the watershed. Today the Skagit River delta is often referred to as "The Agricultural Heartland of Western Washington" and encompasses approximately 70,000 acres. The agricultural industry generates approximately \$500 million annually in revenue and provides a unique landscape. The delta farming community also has developed a high level of cooperation to allow rotation for major cultivated crops.

Recreation and tourism are also important economic sectors, with opportunities for float trips, eagle watching, kayaking, camping, hunting, and backpacking. Several designated wilderness areas are located in the watershed. The North Cascades National Park and the Ross Lake National Recreation Area protect the headwaters of the Whidbey Basin, while extensive areas of public and private forest, as well as several popular state parks, provide habitat protection and allow for low-impact outdoor recreation. Forest land dominates the upper mountainous portions of the watershed, with more than half in the Mount Baker–Snoqualmie National Forest or in state-owned forests managed by the Washington State Department of Natural Resources.

# Local Implementation Structure and Planning Process

Although a great deal of work has occurred through existing processes such as the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan, municipal planning documents, and the work of local watershed groups to identify priorities, at this time, the Skagit River watershed does not have a convening forum such as a local integrating organization (LIO) in which to develop its locally relevant priorities and actions for the Action Agenda.

## Pressures

At this time, the pressures identified by the Partnership in regional pressure assessments are considered relevant to the Skagit River watershed, since discussion is required to determine the relative level of significance of each of these pressures.

- Agriculture and aquaculture
- Energy production and mining
- Natural system modifications
- Biological resource use
- Human intrusions and disturbance
- Transportation and service corridors
- Residential and commercial development
- Pollution
- Invasive and other problematic species
- Climate change

## Local Near-Term Actions

Further work is needed to identify near-term actions for the Skagit River watershed.